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THE STRATEGY ON THE WESTERN FRONT—VII

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL H. H. SARGENT, U. S. ARMY

The victories discussed in the preceding article cannot be explained solely on the ground of the vulnerability of the salients. There were other causes, the most important of which were: The change in the *morale* of the opposing armies; the surprise with which Foch carried out his attacks; and the use of small tanks by the Allies in their offensives.

Writing to his brother Joseph in 1808, Napoleon said: "In war three-fourths are of things moral; the balance of the real forces is but another fourth." ("*A la guerre les trois quarts sont des affaires morales; la balance des forces réelles n'est que pour un autre quart.*")¹

The uninterrupted successes of the Prussian army on the battlefields of Europe during the war with Denmark in 1864, with Austria in 1866, and with France in 1870-71, had given it a moral influence greatly exceeding its actual size. And, in this great war, the Germans had been everywhere victorious, except on the Western front; and even here had met with much success and a number of times been close to final victory. For more than fifty years they had never met with a defeat, nor ever experienced on any battlefield more than a temporary setback. There is nothing that encourages the *morale* of an army like victory. With this record of victories inscribed on its banners, the German army had come to feel that it could not be beaten. It had, it is true, been checked at the Marne, at Verdun, and at the Somme; but it regarded these as no more than temporary setbacks; and now in July, 1918, after four years of persistent fight-

¹ Napier, *Peninsula War*, Vol. 1, p. 452.

ing, with spirits still high and flushed with the success of its four great thrusts, it was making a supreme effort for final victory on the Western front.

On the other hand, the French and British had no victories to encourage them. For four years they had fought bravely, brilliantly, determinedly on the defensive; and although they had succeeded a few times in taking the offensive for brief periods, their whole campaign was one of defense, in which the French and British armies had made, and were still making, every effort in their power to stay the progress of the Germans. During all this time they never lost their grip, never became completely discouraged. Their fighting spirit—their *morale*—was always good. But it was not the *morale* of victorious armies pressing on from one success to another; it was the *morale* of armies driven to bay, fighting for their lives; the *morale* of the defensive; the *morale* that persisted in the face of discouragement, that welled up from the hearts of desperate and determined men, inspired by love of country and the righteousness of their cause.

Such was the situation when the Americans came actively into the fighting. For more than a year they had been getting ready to help. It was a slow process; because, at the outbreak of the war with Germany, the United States, so far as her land forces were concerned, was totally unprepared. Laws had to be passed; civilians had to be made into soldiers; companies, regiments, brigades, and divisions had to be organized, mobilized, and trained, and then sent three thousand miles by water to the theatre of war. But soon troops began to arrive in France; and as fast as they came they were given thorough training, especial attention being given to target practice and the tactics of open warfare, in addition to careful instruction in trench fighting. But their arrival was necessarily slow at first and their training took much time; so that many months elapsed before Generals Foch and Pershing felt that the American divisions were sufficiently well trained and disciplined to take their places side by side with the veteran French and British troops. At the start, the trained divisions were given sectors of the French front to defend in the Lorraine district; later, other divisions, for practically like purposes, and to help stem the tide of any German advance, were placed temporarily under the orders of Brit-

ish and French generals and made a part of their immediate commands.

But the time came when they were to take a still greater and more independent part in assisting to put a stop to the great German thrusts. On May 28, the day following the beginning of the third great German thrust, the First American Division launched an attack against the Germans at Cantigny in Picardy and with splendid dash took the town. It was the first independent, offensive action participated in by the Americans. Strategically it was of little importance, but from a psychological point of view it was of the utmost importance; for it brought great encouragement to the French and British people and their hard-pressed armies. A week later, another and more dramatic event brought still more cheer to the French and British, when the Second and Third American Divisions put a stop to the German advance at Chateau Thierry.¹

The moral effect of these two actions, coming as they did at this critical period, when the Germans seemed just on the point of breaking through the Allied line, was immense. Its effect on the rank and file of the British armies can hardly be overestimated. The Americans had arrived. They had shown themselves to be heroic fighters. With splendid dash, bravery and persistence they had taken Cantigny and had even met and hurled back at Chateau Thierry the Prussian Guards, the very flower of the German army. They had the push, the punch. They could not be denied. And awaiting their turn were other divisions ready and keen for the conflict; and behind them American soldiers pouring into France at the rate of a quarter million a month.

All this was the greatest encouragement the Allies had received during the war. It was a guarantee to them that the tide of battle would soon turn. It was the herald of victory; and as their spirits rose, their *morale* was enormously increased. But of no less importance to them was the correspondingly depressing effect which all this must have had on the Germans in shattering their hopes and in

¹There has recently been considerable controversy between officers of the Third American Division and the Marines as to whether the Marines, who were a part of the Second American Division, actually fought at Chateau Thierry. The truth seems to be that the Marines were not actually in the town itself, but fought at Bouresches, in Belleau Wood, and at other places near Chateau Thierry; and that these actions and those fought immediately in and about the town by the Third American Division are generally spoken of and known as the battle of Chateau Thierry. Certain it is that both these American divisions fought in the Chateau Thierry sector to stop the Germans.

weakening their fighting spirit. With rapidly diminishing numbers, they had to look forward to meeting the rapidly increasing numbers of the Allies. In such a situation only the fortune of war or a great military genius could save them.

The real crisis of the war was to come later, on July 18, when Foch began his great offensive; but the beginning of the great change in the *morale* of the opposing armies, the psychological turn in the tide of the war, was on May 28, 1918, at Cantigny, when the First American Division captured that town—a date and a name ever to be memorable in the history of the war.

As the campaign progressed, the *morale* of the Allied armies continued of course to increase with their victories. Much of this increase was brought about by the skill displayed in the arrangement of the different nationalities on the battle line, and much was due to the friendly rivalry between the French, British and American armies, and the several American divisions.

An example or two in illustration will suffice: When General Mangin arranged his battle line for Foch's great counter offensive of July 18, he placed the famous French Moroccan Division between the First and Second American Divisions. Picture to yourself the situation! Here were two American divisions, both of which had already in their very first action won for themselves an imperishable fame, side by side with the illustrious Moroccan Division, which in brilliant action again and again had written its name in blood and gained for itself an immortal renown. What must have been the feelings of both? The French of course felt that under no circumstances would they allow themselves to be surpassed in courage and dash by the Americans; and the Americans felt to a man that they would show this veteran and brave French division that they, too, even though young and new to the game, could fight as valiantly and, if need be, die as bravely as the bravest.

The British, too, after Foch's great successful counter offensive of July 18, could not but feel that they must not be surpassed by the French and Americans; and with renewed courage they again demonstrated what British soldiers could do. And when the Second American Division in Belleau Wood and the Third at Chateau Thierry

covered themselves with glory, the officers and men of every other American division were determined that, if the opportunity came to them, they, too, would prove to the world that they were no less valiant. So the Forty-second tried to equal the Third; and the First tried to equal the Second; and the Twenty-seventh and Thirtieth vied with each other and tried to equal or surpass the First; and so it went through the American Expeditionary Forces, increasing enormously the *esprit de corps* and *morale* of every combat American division.

The surprise attacks planned and carried out by the Commander-in-Chief of the Allies had also much to do with winning the victories. We have seen how he took advantage of the woods of Villers-Cotterets to conceal and concentrate his troops for the counter offensive of July 18, and from this cover suddenly burst upon the Germans in a surprise attack. But it was perhaps not so much the surprise due to the concealment of his forces prior to attack that deserves mention, as it was the surprise caused by the rapidity of the blows which he struck and the unexpected places where they fell.

Hardly had the Germans been driven from the Chateau Thierry salient when Rawlinson attacked from the British front towards Chaulnes, and Debeney from the Montdidier front towards Lassigny and Roye. These attacks were soon followed by Mangin's attack toward Noyon and Byng's towards Bapaume. Then came Horne's great attack from Arras towards Cambrai and Douai, followed shortly afterwards by Pershing's double attack against the St. Mihiel salient.

Thus, so rapid and unexpected were Foch's blows that the Germans knew not which way to turn. They were being hammered all along the line; and if they weakened one portion of their line to strengthen another, the weakened portion might at any moment be attacked in force.

In nearly all the great battles and campaigns of history, surprise has played an important and, often, a determining part. But on the Western front, with the enemy's aeroplanes always hovering over the battle line, it was extremely difficult for either side to make any great concentration of troops at any particular point of the line and surprise the other side; nevertheless, by taking advantage of the lie of the land and its topographical features, and by moving

troops at night and concealing them as much as possible in the daytime, it occasionally happened that each side was enabled to surprise the other. But on both sides there were other surprises, such as the gas attack and tank attack surprises, which had an important bearing on the outcome.

Poisonous gas was first used by the Germans on April 22, 1915, in an attack against the British and French near Ypres. As first used, it was in the form of chlorine clouds driven by the wind across the enemy's trenches. But soon afterwards the Germans began the development and manufacture of gas shells, in which poisonous gases of various kinds were to be used. By this means they purposed to break through the enemy's lines. Heretofore, their plan had been to destroy first, with high explosive shells, the intrenchments and wire entanglements of the enemy, then to press forward and drive back the defenders; but this method having failed, they hoped by the use of poisonous gases to destroy first the defenders, then to advance with their infantry, destroy quickly the enemy's intrenchments and barb-wire entanglements, and push rapidly forward to the open country beyond. With this end in view, they kept on perfecting their gas shells and improving their methods of making gas attacks.

It was with rolling barrage fire, alternating poisonous gas shells at intervals with shrapnel that they launched their great thrusts against the Allies during the spring and summer of 1918. This method of attack was used with great success. The defenders of the advanced positions were in nearly every case practically annihilated. The almost universal success with which the Germans, in their great thrusts, broke through the Allies' intrenched lines, was largely due to these gas attacks. But no sooner was it seen by the Allies that the Germans had begun to develop this method of attack than they, too, as a means of self-protection, turned their attention to the manufacture of poisonous gases, gas shells, and gas masks. As they did not at first have the same facilities for manufacturing them as the Germans, it was a long time before they could meet the Germans on even terms in the use of this frightful method of warfare. However, they finally succeeded; and by July 18, 1918, when Foch began his great counter offensive, they were surprising the Germans with gas attacks about as frequently as the Germans were surprising them; and, later, towards the end

of the fighting on the Western front, they had begun to outdo the Germans in the use of this destructive element.

During the three and a half years prior to the great German thrust of March 21, 1918, the almost invariable practice of either combatant, in making an attack against the other, was to precede it by a great artillery bombardment of high explosive shells, in order to destroy the intrenchments and barb-wire entanglements, preparatory to the advance of the infantry. But in such an attack there was little opportunity for surprise; because the defenders, always forewarned by the artillery bombardment, knew that the main attack would follow, and were able to concentrate a sufficient force to meet it. In the tank, the Allies found a partial solution of the problem.

General Byng of the British army had conceived the idea of omitting altogether the usual artillery bombardment which heretofore had invariably preceded the attack and of substituting in its place a great number of tanks, which, having been assembled secretly behind the line, were to be launched upon the enemy and open a way through the barb-wire entanglements and intrenchments, and drive out the machine gun nests. By this plan he hoped to surprise the Germans, since there would be nothing to indicate to them that an attack was about to be made.

At Cambrai in November, 1917, General Byng carried out this method of attack with complete success. He broke through the Hindenburg Line on a front of some ten or twelve miles; and although shortly afterwards the Germans counter attacked and recovered their lines, the lesson was not lost on the Allies. They saw at once that here was a powerful weapon of offense that could be used in surprise attacks to smash through the enemy's line and destroy his machine gun fire.

Accordingly, the Allies at once began secretly the construction of a large number of tanks of both large and small size. This took time; and although a good many had been constructed, and might have been used to assist in stopping the great German thrusts, General Foch preferred to wait until more were constructed before launching them against the German lines. He desired to keep the matter of their construction secret until a sufficient number could be used effectively in his own offensives. In this way he hoped to surprise the Germans, who had constructed only a few

tanks, which were known to be very unwieldy and greatly inferior to those of the Allies. This plan was carried out. The tanks were used by General Mangin in the great offensive of July 18, and subsequently, by the other Allied army commanders in their offensives. They were a great surprise to the Germans; and, from the start, were remarkably successful; especially the smaller ones, which, being impervious to machine gun fire and having a speed of twelve miles an hour, were able, after crossing the line of the enemy's intrenchments, and destroying his machine gun nests, to drive ahead of the infantry along with the cavalry and do most effective work in capturing field guns and in rounding up the retreating and disorganized enemy.

(To be continued)